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ABSTRACT

This study sought to compare undergraduate's perceptions of and attitudes toward an educational psychology course in which two distinct types of course readings were used, namely an education psychology textbook versus primary sources. A total of 15 students were enrolled in the course during the fall semester and used the textbooks (Anita Woolfolk's "Educational Psychology" and "Readings and Cases in Educational Psychology") while 23 students were enrolled in the course during the spring semester and used primary source readings ("For the Children: Lessons from a Visionary Principal" (Cartright); "Approaches to Teaching" (Fenstermacher); "Among Schoolchildren" (Kidder); "In There with the Kids" (Kobrin); "Perspectives on Learning" (Phillips); "Horace's School (Sizer); and "Getting Down to Cases" (Wasserman)). At the end of each semester students responded to a questionnaire and were interviewed about the course readings. The results indicated that students whose assigned readings came from the textbook were less satisfied with the course readings than those students who were assigned primary source readings. Students assigned the textbook readings also described the readings as too simple. Students using the textbook felt that the author provided a narrow perspective on the issues discussed, whereas students using the primary source readings cited the benefits of multiple perspectives. (Contains 13 references.) (MDM)

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Teaching Educational Psychology Using Primary Sources: What do the Students Say?

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As a college professor, I have become concerned with actively engaging students in my classroom. Along with my colleagues, I seek ways in which to motivate and encourage students to take responsibility for their learning - to become partners with me in the learning process. Jones and Meyers (1993) describe this change in attitude as one of acknowledging that "students learn not by just absorbing content, but by critically analyzing, discussing, and using content in meaningful ways" (p. 6). As a result, many college professors are reconsidering the ways in which we engage and motivate the learners in our classrooms.

A great deal of what happens in our college classrooms is determined by the reading we assign. Students are motivated to read assigned text depending on how relevant they feel it is to classroom activities, their understanding of course content, and the extent to which they will be held accountable for the reading. One way of increasing students' engagement in course content is to use primary sources such as case studies, original research or personal accounts.

In an article on using primary sources to teach history, Dobyns (1992) asserts that "History itself isn't boring: it's just taught that way. As in science, the natural curiosity of students is snuffed out at an early age (Alter & Denworth, 1990, p. 31). This doesn't have to happen" (p. 52). As a professor who teaches Educational Psychology, I have had students who have expressed similar attitudes towards the content presented in a textbook. On course evaluations they have noted that "some of this stuff is boring." Price (1990) describes the benefits of using primary sources to teach introductory psychology,

> The benefits of reading primary sources are many, especially for first-year students. Foremost is the realization that they not only can read and comprehend Freud, for example, but also that his style and subject matter can interest them. Inhibiting awe is transformed into curiosity (p. 49).

In addition to developing a deeper understanding of course content and relating it to real life, creating an excitement for the content can be achieved by assigning primary source readings.

Students' understanding of the course content may be more in-depth as the result of reading primary sources. Price (1990) continued, "Secondarily, the breadth and depth of most pivotal works provide many integrations lost in desiccating text summaries" (p. 49). Texts may oversimplify theorists' perspectives and research findings. Not only can this "turn students off" to the content of Educational Psychology, but it also eliminates any need for critically thinking about different theoretical perspectives. In order to make students active participants in the learning process, the integration of primary sources needs to be considered and evaluated.

PURPOSE OF STUDY

This study evolved from my interest in formally documenting differences between students in my Educational Psychology courses based on the reading assigned. While the main goal of this research was to study and improve my own practice, the results are worth sharing with other college faculty considering alternatives to a textbook. The purpose of

this study was to compare undergraduate students' perceptions of and attitudes towards an Educational Psychology course in which two distinct types of course readings were used. An Educational Psychology textbook was used one semester and primary sources the following semester. For the purpose of this study, a primary source was defined as original research, original theoretical perspectives, and "real-life" classroom scenarios or stories (case studies).

RESEARCH METHODS

This study involved participants enrolled in an undergraduate Educational Psychology course at a midwestern, private liberal arts college. Fifteen students (9 female, 6 male) were enrolled in the fall semester and 23 (14 female, 9 male) enrolled in the spring semester. Participants' academic ability can be characterized by their above average SAT scores. Within the college, students are also characterized by faculty as "hard workers" and motivated to learn.

Data were collected across two different semesters in the same academic year. During the fall semester, Anita Woolfolk's Educational Psychology, 5th ed. (1993) and Readings and Cases in Educational Psychology (1993) were used as course readings. During the spring semester, a variety of books were used which included: For the Children: Lessons from a Visionary Principal (Cartwright, 1993), Approaches to Teaching (Fenstermacher, 1992), Among Schoolchildren (Kidder, 1990), In There With the Kids (Kobrin, 1992), Perspectives on Learning (Phillips, 1991), Horace's School (Sizer, 1992), and Getting

Down to Cases: Learning to Teach with Case Studies (Wasserman, 1993). In addition, the students were given a course reader with primary source literature specifically, current educational research. At the end of the semester, students anonymously responded to a questionnaire designed by me which addressed their perceptions of course readings. Items included usefulness of course readings in understanding content, challenge of course readings, need to think critically about content, interest and motivation level of readings.

While there may be some concern over the difference in data collection over time, measures were taken to ensure consistency of the ways in which the data were collected during each semester. The questionnaire was administered during the fourteenth week of the semester and interviews were conducted the two weeks following. Each semester, the same general questions were asked of students in interviews. Specific questions we generated for each student based on responses to the questionnaire. In addition, content across the semesters remained consistent even though the reading assigned was different.

In an effort to gain a deeper understanding of student perceptions, each student was briefly interviewed shortly after responding to the questionnaire. Three undergraduate students (all seniors) not enrolled in the course served as interviewers. This was done in an effort to make students comfortable in expressing their honest opinions and perceptions with peers as opposed to me. In an effort to maintain the integrity and consistency of interviews, all interviewers were trained in techniques in facilitating effective interviews. Prior to interviewing students, we reviewed student questionnaires to decide on a set of common questions to ask all students. In addition, follow-up questions to individual

responses on the questionnaire were composed in order to allow students an opportunity to elaborate and clarify their ideas. Interviews were audiotaped and transcribed. All fieldnotes and questionnaires were analyzed for common themes in order to contrast and compare perceptions between groups. In addition, student responses related to assigned readings on a course evaluation were considered.

FINDINGS

Data show that there is indeed, a difference in student perceptions of and attitudes toward Educational Psychology as the result of using primary source readings vs. a textbook. The results of the study are summarized below by themes that emerged from questionnaires and follow-up interviews.

1. Differences in Students' Perceptions of Course Readings

On the questionnaires and in the follow-up interviews students had a great deal to say about their perceptions and opinions of the course readings. Their level of satisfaction, motivation, perceived difficulty of material, and ability to apply information was directly linked to the type of course reading assigned. And, while not all of the students agreed, the following data indicate the common threads found within the students' ideas.

Textbook Group

Data indicate that students in the fall semester whose assigned readings came from a textbook were less satisfied with the course readings than students in the spring semester who read primary sources. One student in the fall semester replied on her questionnaire,

> The textbook was not interesting or motivating. I was not motivated to read the text at all.

Another student shared similar feelings about the textbook,

> The textbook was awful and because it was not challenging, I was not motivated to read it. Some of the readings didn't challenge me to think critically. I just quit concentrating on what I was reading and I was just reading the words because they just didn't have any interest to me.

Data indicate that motivation to complete the assigned reading may have been linked to the quality and interest level of the reading. In addition to these criticisms, students who took the course while a textbook was used described the reading as too simple.

> The textbook went over things a number of times and the diction was very simple. It seemed like pages and pages of definitions and descriptions. It got better when the author gave specific references - even to her own life but that didn't happen too often.

Another student explained how "obvious" the textbook material seemed,

> The concepts don't seem that hard. I kept going through the reading and saying that this is very obvious. Yeah, this is the formal name for something I already knew. So, it seemed very frustrating to read. The textbook was so simplistic.

These data indicate that students want readings to challenge them to think critically about the material. The simplicity of the textbook may have created negative feelings towards the content. When the students were asked what other types of reading materials could have been provided that would enhance their understanding or interest in the course material, one student reflected the feelings of many,

> Maybe more personal accounts of the different theories and philosophies of different teachers would have helped me understand how the information could be applied in real life situations.

This student indicated that primary source readings may have been a welcomed supplement to the textbook. Then, the content contained within the textbook would have a more direct application to real life classroom situation. The application of course content to various contexts helps the students organize and understand new material. Another student commented,

> I think that it would be more useful to read something about inspirational teachers that have changed things and then to learn how to apply these theories to what these individuals have done. It would be more interesting. Having to apply theories to real life situations is more effective then just reading a textbook.

Students suggested that they want course reading that will encourage them to think about the material and apply it to classroom situations. The textbook used did not encourage these students to apply information and make it personally meaningful.

Primary Source Group

The students who read primary source materials indicated more satisfaction with the reading in general than the group who read the textbook. Students indicated having more motivation to complete the reading which created a positive attitude toward the course and course content. One student commented,

> The readings were very helpful. I loved Madeline Cartwright's book - it was inspiring. The reading on theories and methods was good - not too boring. I have heard from friends at other schools that Ed. Psych. is usually a very boring class because of all the theory reading. Our reading helped us learn the theory and then apply it. It made the reading more interesting and enjoyable.

Directly applying course material to classroom practices helped the students understand the direct connection of theory to practice. Not only did this help in students understanding of the material, but also their interest and motivation. Reading a teacher's real life account of what happened and using educational theory to make sense of it enhances the students interest in the course content. The students understood the purpose for learning the course content. Another student indicated,

> Even though we had HIGH VOLUMES of reading, I didn't mind doing it. The readings were very interesting and motivating. It made me excited about becoming a teacher....

> The readings were more motivating and interesting than in other classes I've had. It is really cool to learn by stories and examples of teachers as opposed to just theoretical approaches.

When asked what they thought the class would have been like with a textbook, students overwhelmingly agreed that having many sources of information that were directly applied to classroom situations was better than a textbook; even when it meant more work for them.

> I think it would have meant a lot less reading but I also think the reading would have been a lot less interesting. This class really kept everyone on their toes - but we wanted to do the reading because it was interesting.

The organization which encompasses a textbook allows the reader a wider breadth of information. But, having students read a variety of sources adds to students' interest and forces them to make sense of the material on their own. This facilitates a depth of students' understanding the material. Another student discussed the effects of primary source readings on the classroom interactions,

> I think our class would not have had nearly as much energy as we did. I mean I feel like our class is really energetic and we like to come to class. I feel if we had a text people might not have been doing the reading and it would have been boring, dry stuff. We couldn't have the dynamics that we have now.

Class sessions were better when primary source readings were assigned because it improved classroom interactions.

Students in the spring semester indicated having higher interest in the course content as well as motivation to complete course readings as a result of using primary source literature. Students also indicated that readings from the textbook were not helpful in challenging them to understand and apply the material.

2. Variety of Perspectives - Effects on Understanding of Content

Students discussed the effects of assigned course readings on their understanding of course content. More importantly, students mentioned the effects of trying to make sense of material through reading and class discussion. The depth and variety of readings had an effect on the ways in which students perceived the material and their understanding of course content.

Students reading the textbook felt that the author provided a narrow perspective on issues discussed. One student offered the following response during her interview,

> The textbook gave a general overview of a lot of different topics. It seemed that it covered a million different topics in a shallow way. And, at the same time, it had this annoying bias - like it was so politically correct. The author seemed to show only one side of the issue at times. It would have been better to present all sides and then let us make a decision. But the author had to make the decision to cover a few topics in-depth about what the real life issues are or cover many topics.

Having such a narrow discussion of topics in the textbook impeded the process of students examining their own views in relation to the educational literature. In contrast, students who read primary sources felt that many perspectives on the same issue were offered.

> A combination of research articles and books made it possible to see both statistically and from more individual perspectives what happens in the classroom. The case studies made me think about what I would do if I were a teacher and what different theorists would suggest I try. The readings provided a useful context for the theories that we studied.

Offering students a variety of writing styles and types of literature on teaching allowed them to see multiple perspectives relative to an issue. The students were then responsible for making sense of the information and understanding its application to real life classroom situations.

Another student offered,

> With multiple texts and articles and so on you get a wide range of different view points and people who don't necessarily agree with one another about what to do. You get more open ended things with the case studies where there is no right answer. I think with a text you only get one voice...they're going to summarize what other people have said but you only have that one person's opinion to debate with. You really don't have anything else to put against - to come up with your own ideas. It is nice to have several different peoples' perspectives. Texts tend to say "this is the answer" and reading many sources does not.

Again, students indicated that primary source literature opened up discussions for more invigorating debate about educational practice. Students indicated that the textbook offered a narrow view of issues which limited discussion.

In addition, students felt that having this variety of perspectives led to better discussion of controversial issues in teaching. Because the textbook provided limited perspectives, it did not facilitate discussions as effectively as reading primary sources. One student explained this in more detail,

> I was able to make comparisons between readings and then argue with people in class about my opinion. I don't think I would have the information I needed to get that from a textbook. The text can put it in kind of a dry straightforward, inarguable fashion. You read it, you accept it, and you regurgitate it in class. With the primary sources we read we were given the opportunity to challenge and contradict everything we read.

Another students commented,

> If you can have an interesting discussion with people that agree and disagree on different points, then you learn. You can change your opinion or strengthen your opinion. But, reading different opinions on the same issue encourages me to think about my own opinions.

Students felt that the primary source readings not only gave them different perspectives to consider, but also encouraged them to question their own beliefs and the beliefs of others in the class. Students indicated that this process of reading, critically analyzing and

discussing primary source material added to their understanding of course content and its application in the classroom. Students were challenged by the material as opposed to feeling as if they should automatically believe it.

> The readings challenged me to think critically the most. They gave me a context to analyze and imagine myself in. They brought up sticky situations which teachers are frequently thrown into and situations that do not call for one easy solution.

Reading primary sources requires students to analyze and apply the reading material. Through this critical analysis, students are better able to understand how the content is useful in a classroom setting.

3. Integrating Primary Source Readings with Textbook

Even though students assigned textbook readings did not have as positive a perspective as students who read primary sources, there is still a case for integrating both types of readings into college courses. The textbook provided structure for the content and provided straightforward explanations of concepts. Students reading primary sources were not provided such a formal organization of content. One student explained his desire for a textbook as did some of the other students,

> I would've liked a textbook because it just give me more of a basic outline of what we were covering. I'm used to a textbook. These books and articles we read didn't lay everything out for me.

Students who read primary sources seemed somewhat insecure at first with the lack of structure in content. Instead, students were expected to make sense of all the material and organize it through class discussions. Connections between ideas were not explicit. In this way, the textbook may help students make connections and tie information together.

DISCUSSION

This study was designed to understand students' perceptions of the course readings assigned while enrolled in an undergraduate Educational Psychology course. On a teacher-made questionnaire and in follow-up interviews, students did indeed indicate differences in using a textbook and primary sources as course reading material. In comparing students' comments it became apparent that students preferred to read information directly from the source as opposed to having it summarized in a textbook. Students indicated that an opportunity to critically analyze primary sources not only increased their understanding of the course content, but also increased their motivation level and created a positive attitude towards course content.

Their are a number of recommendations that professors should consider when attempting to incorporate primary sources into their college classrooms. First, when deciding on reading assignments, professors should be aware of students' need for a structure and organization of content. The burden of tying information together falls on the professor when using a variety of readings: this structure should be made explicit on the course syllabus and during class discussions. Second, the level of reading and work

required of students when primary sources were incorporated was intense. This level of reading may not be appropriate for all college students. Professors should modify the amount and level of reading to meet their students needs and abilities. Third, it might be helpful to have an Educational Psychology textbook as a reference for the students or assign it as a recommended text. This way, students can have a structured text to refer to when trying to make sense of primary source material.

CONCLUSIONS

The primary goal of this research was to collect data that would guide personal reflection on teaching practices. It is our hope to share with you the findings so that you may consider the use of primary sources in the college classroom. The data from this research adds to our knowledge about teaching Educational Psychology. While the reading assigned to students in an Educational Psychology course is typically a textbook, this research suggests that college professors should consider using a selection of primary literature combined with books which demonstrate realistic teaching situations. In this study, students experienced increased interest and motivational levels. Students became active participants in the process of learning about teaching when primary sources were incorporated. This research indicates that primary sources can be valuable building blocks and springboards for discussion of content and issues related to Educational Psychology.

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